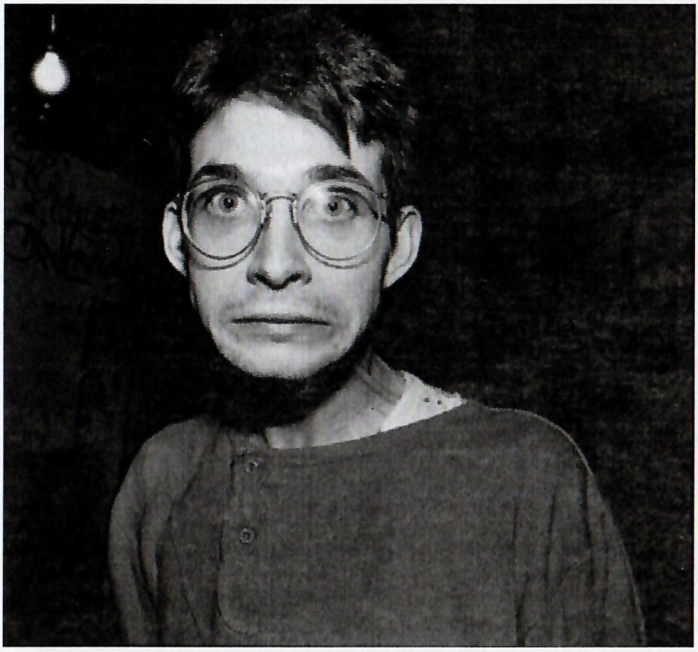
WASHING MACHINE MUSIC

WHY STEVE ALBINI MATTERS



PLUS: AN INTERVIEW WITH IAN MACKAYE

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Ian Mackaye

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I read in Michael Azerrad's book, "Our Band Could Be Your Life", that you first picked up guitar because of Jimi Hendrix, and then you also had some inspiration from Joe Cocker for your stage presence in Minor Threat, and I thought that was really interesting because I feel like with a lot of punk rock, people either have this really strong derision for pre-MC5 era kind of rock, or they have a lot of respect for it. So how has that hippie era, pre-punk era of rock music influenced what you have done musically?

Ian: First of all, I should say I've never read Michael's book. I know Michael, and I know the book, but I always felt like, that would be weird to read about myself. So I don't know if it's true that I first picked up the guitar because I loved Hendrix, but there's no question that I still love Hendrix, and I still think of him as one of the most transcendent musicians to ever live, period. He's an absolutely incredible musician, and I still am studying his work. I have 40 gigs of bootlegs, and I just listen to all these practice tapes. Very interesting guy. Very incredible musician. I think, though Hendrix certainly was inspirational for me and very important, and obviously Joe Cocker in terms of his performance and his sort of sense that he was letting it all out — have you seen that performance? The Wolfpack performance? So he really lets it all out, you know? Also, I mean, he didn't, maybe she's not in the book, but Janis Joplin was a huge influence on me. For the similar reasons, because she was so emotional, and just so — the way she sang was just, felt really, that she was just fully committed to the moment. So these musicians, along with quite a few others, the Beatles were and remain huge for me. I listen to them all the time still, and I study them. I listen to probably the Beatles more than any band. But I think more to the point, I love music. And when I got into punk — let me change a little bit. Let me just say this.

When I was 23 years old, I decided to become a vegetarian. When I was 24 years old, I decided to become a vegan. That was 39 years ago. And my relationship with food changed so dramatically when I started thinking about what it was I was eating. And it made me grow to love food in a way that was profound — not love food that I want to eat it, but to really love the nutritional and energy components of it. And also the power to connect people and — Food is just phenomenal. It's an incredible part of life. But prior to the diet change, food is just something I ate. And I just ate junk.

Similarly with music, I listened to music on the radio mostly. And some records that I could get, they were expensive. I didn't have that many records. But when I got into punk in 1979 — when I started thinking about what it was I was going to listen to, the same way I started to think about what I was going to eat — once I started to think about what I was going to listen to, and I kind of decided I'm not going to study commercial music again, really. Once I did that, it made me go back into music in a way — understand it, the deeper components of it, of music — or at least have a better understanding of what I was concerned.

And it was a really profound experience for me to revisit the Beatles, revisit Jimi Hendrix, revisit Janis Joplin, Joe Cocker, and get to beyond the sort of commercial component of them that had been really was something that was created by the industry that sells their records. But behind all that, there's something that's fucking real. And that's what I'm interested in.

So for me, music — I always say that the counter of music is music made by people who don't have a choice in the matter. And I think that Hendrix and Cocker and Joplin and the Beatles and James Brown, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, had no choice in the matter.

I find it really interesting because I feel like a lot of the people that I meet who get into punk rock, like teachers, friends, me, it started in the same place of the Beatles and whatever. And then it becomes this interest — you think more about like, what am I listening to? And then it just inevitably comes.

Ian: But once you attenuate your ears to hearing music that's not purely commercial, then you can go back to that attenuation and go revisit the Beatles or other bands that used commercial. And you'll hear that beneath the sheen that has been applied to them by the industry, that there's real music happening. There's something really deep going on, and you can have a different appreciation for it.

I feel like that's how I felt about the Beach Boys, weirdly, because I didn't appreciate the Beach Boys at first. Initially, I thought they were very white bread. And then years later, I came back, and I learned what Brian Wilson was trying to do and how he was influenced by all these experimental music movements. And you realize, when you hear it first, you don't think it's that profound or that complex, but you realize he's doing all these weird, complex things.

Ian: Exactly. And that's a very good example, because I still struggle with the Beach Boys because they seem so confectioned. They seem sweet, but then you realize that beneath it, there's some very heavy visions going on. I quite like — have you ever heard the Smile record, the bootleg?

Not yet, but I have been meaning to.

Ian: That's a really interesting record, because that one breaks with the conventional ideas about music, and it's very interesting.

For my next question, this is a little bit related to my original premise for this interview. So when you started Dischord, that was kind of — I was already really familiar with punk rock at that point, but when I read about you starting Dischord from just you and your friends, that kind of opened for me — I knew DIY in a very abstract sense, but suddenly it became very practical. Oh, this is how you do X, Y, Z. So when you were doing it originally, when you were 18, how did you navigate the practicalities? — How are we going to record this? How are we going to get things pressed? How are we going to put things in the stores?

Ian: How did you get in touch with me?

I went to your website.

Ian: Okay, so basically you approached it from a point of view of just a practical application. You're like, all right, I'm interested in this person. I want to talk to him. How do I get in touch with him? So you went to the website, you started looking, you wrote to an address maybe, and eventually I wrote you back, correct?

Yeah.

Ian: All right, so you take that same kind of approach. That's how we put our records. All right, nobody else is going to put our record out. That was not even a consideration. Why would they? We were an okay punk band from Washington, D.C., teenagers. We were 17 and 18 years old. We had played some shows, but we certainly weren't a hugely popular band. And we'd broken up. There was no commercial — there's nothing commercial about us at all. So there's no one on earth was going to be like, I want to put out your record.

But we wanted to document our music. It was important to us. So we thought, okay, how do we do it? So we went and talked to people who had done records and asked them, how did you do it? And they said, "well, here's where we went". They gave us a phone number to this place called National Record Productions in Nashville, Tennessee. And we called them and said, okay, what do we do now? And they said, send us a tape and some money. And it's really just an organic — we didn't have any idea how to do it. None of our parents were music people at all. We had no — the only guidance we had was from this one guy, really, who had put out a couple of records on his own. And we just made it up as we went along.

But mostly the desire was the active ingredient. And whether or not you ever, like this ever becomes a printed interview or not, it doesn't matter because it will have its value. The machinations you put into place to actually get me on the thing and your tenaciousness, like your writing, your good correspondence, then you think, all right, I've learned something. And it's the same way I feel about the record label. I learned something along the way. It just so happened that once we created it, there was a little bit of — interestingly, there was a concern that people would think that we were cashing in.

Because if you think about it, making a record is —, it is literally, and I mean the word literally in the actual definite — the way it's defined in the dictionary. It is literally a commodification of music, right? We're taking some sound and we're putting it into plastic and we're selling it. It turns it into money. And that was something that was an anathema to those of us at that time in the scene. We were, in our scene, music was really a live experience. It was bands playing and people dancing and that's what it was. And it wasn't ever about making money. We didn't, weren't thinking about that. So making a record was an actual commodification process.

But we said, "Well, listen, if we can actually sell these things — we put our own money up for it. If we can sell them all the money we get back, including the seed money — the money that we had saved up from playing shows, all of that money will go into putting out another local band's record." So we thought, "Let's just document our friends' bands. That's what we'll do." So it's just been one step after another as we try to, we'd look at a situation and try to figure out how to navigate it.

I often — I really believe in something, I used to say creative response. How do you respond to something? And how do you do it creatively? So it's not just cliche or typical or stereotypical or just boring. How do you do it so it's interesting? How do you keep life engaged? You feel engaged with life. So that's really what we know — I think we've always done this. Even today, I'm still, I was across the street when I came back over. We have an office across the street, and I was thinking about, "How could we deal with this particular project?" I'm still thinking, it never ends. I've been doing it now for, it'll be 45 years in December.

So did you not — I'm trying to think how to phrase the question. You did not have initial intimidation about — were you not initially intimidated by the concept of, "Okay, I'm gonna actually go." Because a lot of people think about doing these kinds of things as like, like hypothetically, right? But the actual idea of, oh, I'm actually gonna do this and make this a real physical thing and I'm gonna share it with other people, is that not initially intimidating at all?

Ian: Not at all. But also, part of my thing is I don't give a fuck. You guys — I always say, I care, but I don't give a fuck. I really care and I work hard. But if someone got into it, I don't care, fuck them. Does not bother me at all, I don't care.

I mean, that's a good philosophy to have. But my second question related to this is, obviously, a lot of things have changed since 1980. So as Dischord has evolved and certain bands have become somewhat popular, how has the practices evolved?

Ian: Well, I mean, I guess to the point about the money, at some point, I think it was about seven years in, Jeff and I actually started paying ourselves, and we started paying royalties prior to that. And we still, to this day, we pay royalties. Every six months, I sit down and write checks to all the bands when they sell their records going to profit. So that's certainly different, because no bands got paid at all for the first four or five years, period. The first royalty we ever did — we did an arrangement with this band called Scream. And we paid them royalties by letting them use our phone bill to book a tour, which was very expensive at the time. And we helped put a new engine in their van. That was how we paid royalties then.

But then later, we actually figured out, we started to understand how to keep track of how many records you sold. Now, we didn't know any of that stuff. We were just, it didn't matter, because all the money just went back into putting the next record on. We just had jobs. We paid our own rent, our own stuff out of our own money. And then all the money for the label was just kept in the label. So we never had to think about how to account for anything.

But once we got to the point where we started making so much money, we were like, "Alright, we gotta start paying the bands." But again, it was just creative response and just navigating the situation as it comes.

I mean, have things changed in the 45 years? Well, of course. You were born, for instance (*chuckles*) 30 years ago. I mean, it's always a change.

But it doesn't mean you can't apply the same principle response. You can still do, regardless of the question, if you're set in your position — if you want to not set stuff, but if you feel clear about your position, whatever the question is, you can answer it from that position. And I think we've been really consistent about that. We've started out as a label to document a particular sort of underground music scene in Washington, D.C. And we're still doing the same thing to this day. I think the distinction between us and a lot of other labels is that we never thought of it as a business. And we never thought about being rich. We never — we just don't give a fuck about that.

I think that most people, it's like, okay, how can we make money? And we just, that was not an interest. That was not an issue for us.

I'm a, so I'm pretty obviously, if I'm interviewing you, I'm a pretty big Minor Threat and Fugazi fan, but I also like the Evens and some of the later stuff as well. And there's a lot of pretty big stylistic evolutions — stylistic evolutions between all three of those bands, right? So just like — I'm not sure how to phrase this question either, but what was the thought process behind the way the sound changed — has changed between your different projects?

Ian: Uh, I would say there's not thought about it so much. I mean, think about yourself at five and ten and fifteen, those four, three different ages, like you're you, right? But the way you talked, the things you were interested in, the things you like to eat, um, you're like, those things change, right? Like, I assume that you're different than you were when you were five, correct?

Yeah.

Ian: Okay. So I'm 63 years old now, and I've been playing music for a long time. Uh, each of those bands represented the music that was inside of me at that time. It doesn't, I don't see it as — to me, I see a line. I actually feel like you can really hear, you can hear my voice and all those, like, not just my voice literally, but you, you hear my aesthetic. It's still present in all of them. It's just different times.

I don't — I'm not a progression person, but I'm an evolution person. So I'm not looking to — I think people get into trouble with music because they try to second guess what people want to hear. But I'm not interested in what people want to hear. I'm interested in what is coming out of me. That's what I'm interested in. And how can I do it? Can I create something that's, that satisfies what it is I'm feeling inside of myself? Um, and obviously as you get older, again, using you as an example, like, I assume that your handwriting has changed over the last 10 years.

Yeah.

Ian: Okay. So, same way, like when you pick up a guitar, you know, when I pick up a guitar, it just picks up — you know, I get — (*strums guitar*) I just pick up different — over the years — I played for so many years that, um, things just get — it's like handwriting. It just changes — you get better or worse, depending on how you look at it. It's just the way it's just through experience and experience is very much — I think experience is very much a guide for me, you know, not just the experience that I've had, but the experience that I'm having.

I guess the question that I'm really trying to ask is more of like, what specific influence — I know I read somewhere where you described, um, Fugazi as like MC5 meets Bad Brains. Is that correct? But more like, like, what is it—

Ian: MC5, reggae, we did MC5 and dub music, and the Obsessed, et cetera. (laughs) It's just, it's just music, you know, like I just listen — I didn't, in other words, it wasn't like I was listening to something and like, oh, I want to do that kind of band. Like, I was listening to music — for instance, like with Minor Threat, like I loved Black Flag. I love Sham 69. I love the Circle Jerks. I love the Weirdos and the Germs. I love the Avengers. I love the Bad Brains. So this is our offering. Imagine it's like a potluck. This is the plate we brought, a plate of Minor Threat, you know, that's what we're offering. Like, they have their offerings, here's ours. And it's a similar kind of — it's in a similar vein. Fugazi — I don't really know where that — that just was experience and just, you know, it's not just me. Every band is a relationship. And the sound that we make, it's acute. Like, though I'm probably the most well-known person in Fugazi by name, we're absolutely a democracy. Brendan and Joe and Guy and I were equals in that band, and we remain equals. I saw Brendan last night. Joe's daughter works out here. Like, these are my — that's my family. And the music we made together was something that was only possible between the four of us. And with The Evens — I mean, Amy is literally my family. She's my wife. And that's the music the two of us made together. And every — but it's me — it's just relationships.

And that's the sounds — it's also, you know, like, there are pragmatic components. Like, for instance, with The Evens, I really had become tired of playing in essentially bars. Because as you get bigger and bigger, as Fugazi got bigger, the rooms that would safely accommodate 1,000, 1,500, 2,000 people, those rooms are largely — they're places that their alcohol is the biggest economy for them. They're bars. And it was not lost on me that this art form, this form of expression that I had made into my life's work, somehow could only be shared in venues in which self-destruction was the primary economy. That's just bizarre to me. I used to say,

imagine if all poets, if poets could only say their poems in crack houses. That's what it felt like. Every time you see a band, that has to be where there's a bar.

So I really was interested in playing music in other locations. So I thought, "What is it that drives bands into bars?" Why are bars — what is it about bars that has somehow corralled so much of music? Not all of it, but most of it.

Aside from the obvious thing, where the alcohol industry has branded itself as necessary for music, which is insane, of course, but people believe it. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll, right? Like it's just like alcohol — you know, I've played shows in Europe where people say, if there's no alcohol, you can't have a show. Because they're that brainwashed by the alcohol industry's way they think.

But leaving that aside, what is it that makes bands so easily corralled? It has to do with sound reinforcement. Bands are loud, so they have to be in rooms that either have a properly soundproofed or have the tacit agreement of the neighbors.

And bars usually have those PAs in place. And that's really, in the end, people are accustomed to going to them. So I thought, "Okay, well, how can we get around that?" Turn it down, have your own PA, play quieter. And people say, "Well, it's not powerful." But in my mind, the most powerful experiences in my life, by far, have been in near silence. So volume does not equate power. It can be powerful, but it's not the only form of power. So we could be quieter.

So these are the kind of thinking that I might put into the process. Like, this is where Amy and I talked about, like, how can we do this band in a way that would help us circumvent the way the music industry works? So we said "We can play quieter, so the sound is different." But it's coming from the same place.

My other question, which is a little bit related, is, like, even though the sound is really different, they're all, I would say, pretty political. And so, like, where did that interest in politics — because for me, I can trace it back to, like, specific events. Like, I am obviously not white. And I was in the first grade when Trump was, elected for his first term. So from a pretty young age, I was like, okay, the world is kind of not super fair. So, where did that interest come for you in your life?

Ian: Well, first of all, I think everything is political. So, like, if you give me an example of a piece of music that's not political, you'll see that it's actually political in it's abject ignoring of the situation around it, right? So that's a political statement. And of course, in our country — this is in the United States, and I don't know much about — Saudi Arabia you're living?

Yeah.

Ian: Yeah, I don't admit — that's a whole other— I don't know that much about the political situation there. It seems pretty...

...Interesting.

Ian: Yeah. But I would say for sure that the largest voting block in the United States is the apathetic voting block. People who don't vote at all or people who don't think about

voting. They're just, they just don't think about it. They're just like, I guess I'm this or I'm that. They just — so they're the ones who are really — it's really the people who don't vote that really are steering because they could change the course of this, but they didn't — so many people didn't vote in that last election. I was like, "It doesn't matter." Well, we'll see, you know, but so to me, my point, my point being everything, everything is political. I don't know if, I don't know what you mean by political in terms of my music. I don't, I wouldn't say that every song I wrote is specifically political. I don't think that's true, but I mean, in terms of politics, but certainly political in terms of relationship, of course, yeah.

I would say the same way you growing up, um, yeah, when I, when I grew up, um — who's that?

It's my brother.

Ian: Oh, hi brother. He's off camera. It's alright. Hey. Hi, buddy. Um, when I was, see when you were in — you're in kindergarten?

Brother: I'm almost turning — I'm almost going to grade one. (*he leaves*)

Ian: Alright, so when I was seven years old — when I was six years old, Martin Luther King was assassinated. And DC split into rioting. And it was so clear to me that something was not right in the world. The Vietnam war was happening. I thought for sure I would go to war when I was 18 years old. I just thought that's what you had to do. You had to immediately turn 18 and they'd just take you to the jungle to fight and to kill or to die. I was not going to do it. I was a pacifist from the word go.

So I just was not — and clearly, like I grew up in a family that was pretty left-wing. We were part of an Episcopalian church that was a very radical liberation theology church. So this is a church that in 1974 was involved with a gay marriage, in 1974 allowed women to say mass before Episcopal women were allowed to say mass. It was a shelter for war protesters and a shelter for civil rights things. We had meetings with the Black Panthers at the church — we were very engaged in that kind of political stuff. I grew up in that setting. Now, I didn't — I ultimately left. I was not a member of that. My parents were members. My mom left that church in '74, and I was out soon after, but I was in that church — St. Stephen and the Incarnation here in Washington is still a radical church and still really involved with the community. And I was on the phone this morning with the facilities manager there trying to help her solve some problems, because I really think there's an important location — I'm not an Episcopalian. I'm not religious. I'm not a subscriber. And I haven't been a member of that congregation for 40 years, but I'm, or more, but I really support that — I support that place. I think they do incredible work, and I'm always interested in helping them if I can.

So, I guess the point being is that when I was a kid, the same way when you were coming up, and you're like, "Oh man, the world has got problems," I have to say, as weird as it looks now, what was happening in the 60s was probably even more terrifying. I think the world always has problems, but more to the point — and this is how I wish people would think about it — the world is also always beautiful. There's so much good going on, and the media, especially now, your pocket media is just, it just is a terrorizer. It just makes people feel like everything is terrible all the time. I don't think it's true. There are problems for sure, but everything is not terrible. Everything is not horrible, and that people should seize upon the joy, I think, and the hope, *because that's how we're going to navigate all these fucking idiots.*

My next question is shifting a little bit. When I was doing some research, both for this and some other projects, I was surprised a little bit how much — I want to say cross-pollination, I saw happening between D.C. and Olympia in the 80s, which was really interesting to me because they're super far away. So my first question in the series of questions related to this is: How did you first hear about Beat Happening and K-Records? Because you did release a single with them and such, so when did that relationship first start?

Ian: I first met Calvin Johnson, who's, I guess, the main person at K-Records, and he was in Beat Happening — I met Calvin Johnson on New Year's Eve 1980, or 1981, that New Year's Eve at a party. And his mom lived in D.C., so he would come here for holidays, so we would see him at shows. And people who got to know — like, Brendan knew him, the drummer of Fugazi. Brendan's older sister lived in Olympia, too. So we just started to make these connections, and Calvin became friends with Cynthia Connelly, who I was dating at the time, and also who's the person who drew the black sheep on the Out of Step record cover. And she put out a book called "Banned in DC". She's a very incredible artist, brilliant person. So she became friends with Calvin — so just all these, we just got to — people just got to know each other, and then we started, you know, we went out, and Fugazi played, and we met, you know, Lois Maffeo and Heather and, you know, all the Beat Happening people, and we started meeting all these musicians and artists out there, and we would just go back — and people moved here, and some people moved there. It just seemed like they're both capital cities, and one thing about a capital city is that while the government is churning away, somewhere in the shadows, culture is occurring.

Bikini Kill also was like, had that kind of same thing, where they were formed in Olympia, but then they came down to D.C. and were there for a while, and you guys also had a lot of, like, meetings with — so what was it like working with them, playing with them?

Ian: You know, I produced their first record, actually—

Oh, yeah, that was another question I was going to ask. What was that experience like, producing their first record?

Ian: I can't really tell you about how things felt or were like, whatever—

Like, what about them compelled you to want to do it for free?

Ian: They came back, they came to Washington with Nation of Ulysses, who they're sort of like, I mean, quite literally, sort of our little brother band, in a way, because James Canty, who's Brendan's younger brother, James was the drummer in Ulysses, and Brendan was the drummer of Fugazi, but we knew all of them. They lived, we knew everybody, those guys really well, and they arrived back from a tour with Bikini Kill, and Bikini Kill played at D.C. Space, a venue here, and their first show — it was just incredible. And at that time, I worked at a studio called — I was working, I still work, with Don Sinterra at Inner Ear Studios. I've been with him since 1980, and Don said to me, "If there's ever a band you like, you think is important, I'll give you free time if you'll pay for the tape." So I had this standing offer to take, like, not get into big projects, but like one-day projects, whatever. So I saw them, and I thought, "Wow, they're incredible." I was really moved by them, so I said, "Do you guys want to record?" And they said yes; it was that simple. I didn't know them, I met them, that's when I met them, the night of that show. But they were, yeah, they were very, I mean, they're a very interesting band, they're challenging.

I mean, one thing about them, I have to say, the meetings you're referring to, kind of the D.C., we had meetings, like, gender issues, like, we had those meetings in 1986. Bikini Kill came in 91, so it was quite a bit later. But they were a very important band, but I felt like D.C. — the women here were so — such a huge part of our community, and it wasn't as if they needed to be, sort of, like, spoken up for, because they fucking spoke up for themselves, for sure. But Bikini Kill came, and they really were inspiring, and they really excited a lot of people, and they formed —, the original Riot Grrrl sort of scene came out of Washington, and they started having meetings here. I couldn't go to the meetings, they were women-only meetings, but it was good, yeah, very interesting time.

And then — I was reading Thurston Moore's memoir a few months previously, and he said that in the early 80s, he discovered, I think it was the early 80s, sometime after he came to, like, recently after he moved to New York, and he got ahold of a Minor Threat record, and he said that you guys really influenced him at the time, and he called you guys the best hardcore band that ever was. So I was wondering, like, what's your relationship with his music, with Sonic Youth like? Because in my mind, a lot of the bands that I've listened to, they're kind of just some way Sonic Youth has kind of just put their DNA in their work.

Ian: Yeah, I mean, I saw Sonic Youth for the first time in, I think, 1984, and I thought they were great. Their records were okay. I liked them live a lot. I liked Thurston a lot. He's a really interesting guy, and we were quite good friends, and I knew him and Kim — and Steve Shelley, the drummer, I actually knew him when he was in a band, his band before Sonic Youth. They were a little arty, artier than my world. They were kind of, they were coming out of a New York kind of artier world. And so I didn't really know that scene that well. They were sort of part of that — and they signed pretty early on to a major label, and they, you know, I mean, Kim Gordon, actually, famously was part of why Nirvana got signed. So that's, you know, that's got its pluses and minuses, in my opinion. You know, I was not into the major label thing, so — but, you know, it got a lot of attention. People were really excited about it. Yeah, I think Thurston first wrote me in 1982, or '83. He had a fanzine. He interviewed us for his fanzine, and he loved the records early on.

Well, this question is kind of a bit random, but, so in doing research for this, I was watching a Nardwuar video from 2001, where you talked about dancing with Fear on SNL, which you kind of already talked about that story, but I'm a pretty big SNL fan. So what was it like, that experience? Like, how did you get involved with that?

Ian: Didn't I tell that story on the Nardwuar thing? A little bit, but I don't know. Literally, I was asleep. The phone rang. It was the Saturday Night Live people, which I didn't understand. It was completely insane. I don't have, I was not — even though now people are like, well, it's not that big of a deal, because, you know, Saturday Night Live, but — I mean, imagine if, like, right now, you had a call from, I don't know, like a NASCAR famous, like, NASCAR driver, or a, it just was so out of left field —I had no relationship. They were not — Saturday Night Live was not punk at all. And the fact that, and I was just living in Washington. I didn't know anybody in the music, in the entertainment business at all. I was just a little punk guy. This is, you know, October of '81.

I was 19 years old. So, I got this call from Saturday Night Live, which I, of course, knew the show, because I had watched it. And they said, hey, we got Fear coming on, and they want to get some real punks to come dance. And I was, I said, what? What are you talking about? And they said, here, hold on. And then John Belushi got on the phone with me, and he was friends with this woman named Penelope Spheeris. And Penelope Spheeris had directed a film called

Decline of Western Civilization, which is about the early L.A. punk scene. She had come to Washington. She'd screened her film here two nights at the American Film Institute, and we'd all gone to see it, and we ended up hanging out with her. And she really liked us, and she thought we were really cool kids. So, when John Belushi — he was no longer on Saturday Night Live. They wanted him to come make a cameo, like to make an appearance. And he thought he would do it if they would put Fear on as a musical guest, because he was in — he liked that band. He was a big — he kind of liked punk stuff. So, they agreed. But then he said, but I also want to have dancers. So, he asked Penelope, and she said, "You should call these guys from Washington. Here's Ian McKaye's number," because she had my number. And so, he called and said, "Would you guys — I just want to have some real punks, not like fake punks, come on the show." So, we said, sure. So, they said, okay, just come up to 30 Rock, and when you get to the security guard, just say Ian McKaye, and that'll be the password.

So, as it happened, the Misfits and a band called the Necros from the Midwest were playing the night before. So, we went up to see that show, and then we told all of our friends from the Midwest and our friends from New York, "Just come to 30 Rock and say Ian McKaye, and they'll let us in." The actual experience was, you know, it was just weird, because it's like, you don't, like, you have to — I don't know if you've ever been on a television show, but you just go stand there, and they go, okay, now start acting. But for me, just dancing and music was not acting. So, it was bizarre to suddenly be like, "Okay, go crazy, now, start now." And they were upset with us, because they thought we were too crazy, and actually, people in the front row were fighting us. We had, like, fights with the people. They were punching us, and at the end of the day, they were gonna have us all arrested, but then they just let us go. It was funny, and the real irony is that I thought Fear was kind of a funny joke band, but they're not a band. They were a joke band to me. I didn't take them seriously at all. So, for me, they were kind of like the kind of — as an inside joke, it's okay, but as a representation of punk, it was embarrassing.

Why specifically do you feel like they were not, like they were a joke band?

Ian: Have you read their lyrics?

(*laughs*) No.

Ian: Maybe listen to their songs. "I'm, like, licking up some drunk puke", or, I mean, it's just cartoonish punk stuff. You know?

Oversimplification.

Ian: Yeah, and it's just not, you know, it just was, yeah, just, Lee Bing was an actor, the singer, and he was, they were doing a representation of what they thought punk was, but it's not where I was coming from. I was serious. I have time for one or two more. Do you have a ton more?

No, just a few more.

Ian: All right.

Part of the zine, we're doing a bit on, doing, like, some writing about Big Black and Shellac, and a lot of Steve Albini's production work, and why I feel like, personally, it's really, really important to music, so I know you've worked with him, like, you recorded with him a little bit, and you performed with him a little bit, so if you would want to talk about working with him — elaborate.

Ian: Fugazi recorded with Steve. It was one of the most enjoyable recording sessions we ever did, but the results were not very good, and I think Steve agreed. We loved it at the time, but when we got out of there, we were like, "Ah, not quite — didn't quite fit." His aesthetic is quite a little bit different than ours. I think that might be part of it. I think we were a little too — we were just having a good time, and maybe we were having too good a time. We were just laughing. We also recorded 13 songs in two days; it was a little nuts. Steve was an absolutely brilliant guy, very charismatic, very funny and sweet, though he had kind of a prickly exterior — could come off very snobbishly, but as he got older, he got sweeter, and I think he really started to think about some of his, the way he had comported himself as a younger person, and I think he had some regrets. He certainly had said that as much publicly, but yeah, I loved him, and we were good friends.

Do you remember the first time you heard his music? What specifically — you said you didn't like the results, and that's why you didn't use it, but what interested you in the first place in recording with him, and how did you hear—

Ian: Steve, actually, the only reason we, —Steve had said to us at one point, he said, "If you ever want to record, I'll do it for free. I love your band." So we were, in 1992, we were working, we were writing all these songs, we'd been working and practicing and practicing and writing and writing and writing, and we were in the fall, and we kind of hit a wall, and we're like, what are we doing? We don't know what we're doing, and I said to the band, "Well, listen, if Steve says he'll record for free, why don't we just go up, why don't we just go up there, and we'll record a couple of songs, we'll just drive up for the weekend, we'll go see Steve, and go see our other friend in Chicago, and just get us out of the basement, where we're practicing, working on songs, and just change the scenery, and it'll be a hoot. Let's go do it, and he'll take them up on his offer to do this free session." So we got to his house, at the time his studio was in the basement of his house, and we set up, and we started recording, and it was like, "Well this sounds great, let's just keep recording songs." It was a blast, you know, we just worked for three days straight, we recorded and mixed everything in three days, and, but it wasn't like, we were like, "That's the song we want." We hadn't listened to him, and thought like, "That's the aesthetic we want." Mostly, he just seemed like he was a funny guy, and he said, do you want to come record? I'll do it for free, and we're like, "Well, that'll get us out of the basement, let's just go do that."

I first heard Steve, I guess it was, it must have been Big Black, I saw them, they were good. Again, not exactly my aesthetic, but I like him, I like — he's a brilliant guy, Shellac, we played with him many times, or quite a few times, they're a fantastic live band, just great. Bob and Todd are just also geniuses, in their own right. But, I don't know — I think mostly, he was just a friend of ours, and he said he'd do it for free, and we're like, "Why not, let's go."

And for my last question — actually two, two small ones, what are some new artists, or bands, or labels, or anything that you think are kind of pushing the needle forward — like musically, like politically, or lyrically, or musically, or whatever way that you find interesting, or innovative?

Ian: I mean, I mostly see local bands, there's a band here called Drawn, that I saw, that are very interesting — they don't have a record out, very cool, I love Sensor Ghost, I like my brother and sister's bands, Bedmaker, and Hammered Holes, they both have — they're both singers in those bands. I saw a band from Switzerland the other day, called Orchestre Tout Puissant Marcel Duchamp, or something like that, it was a 12 piece band, that was fuckin' phenomenal, really interesting — they're not a new band exactly, but they were really inspiring. I saw Os Motantes from Brazil, they're a band that formed in 1966, I saw them on Friday night, incredibly fuckin'

inspiring. I think that there's — there's a venue here called The Rise Zone, it's a, it's a collective kind of art, collective, and they put on all these really experimental shows, I think it's very interesting, and I really love that venue, it's just a house, no stage, it's just a house with the walls knocked down, and it's really, um, it's — I really love that presentation, um, what else, there's a band here that I saw called the 504 Plan, they're kids, and they're just so (chuckles) they're so excited, and they're so, that show was fantastic too, they're just nuts, um, you know, I think, they might have a thing on, on YouTube, or on Bandcamp, but I don't think they have any records out, um, but I don't know.

My answer — your first question was about Jimi Hendrix and the Beatles, and Joe Cocker, et cetera, and, I think I said to you that, you know, music is — I just, I study music, so for me, I don't really think, like, "What's the new thing?" I don't think about the new thing, I just — I just see music, and, uh, I believe, that, as we speak, people are — somebody has a vision somewhere, and something is coalescing in a way,. I always believed that, only because, I felt like at one point, I was coalescing that very way, why somebody else was coalescing, so I feel hopeful, always — that's just my way, though, I'm just, I actually, I feel hopeful, in my life, — and music, from my point of view, music is a gift, that if you give it to someone, it will continue to give, but when you polish up and sell it, it just becomes a product. So I'm interested in the gift of music, not the sale of it, uh, and the last thing I'll say, on the, on the, on the subject, is that, music kicked my ass, um, and I only ever intended to return the favor.

For my final question—

Ian: You said that, you said that was your final question!

No, that was — I said I had two final questions, this is my last question.

Ian: You can only have one, there's only one final question, but okay, that was your penultimate question, and now your final question.

I have a lot — so, like I said, I live in Saudi Arabia — I go to an American school, but I live in Saudi Arabia, and even over there, like, there's a whole clique of kids in my school that are into punk rock, and like, DIY and zines, and all that kind of stuff, that's forming, so, what advice, whether it be like, philosophically, practically, whatever, would you have to like, kids who are like, "I wanna, you know, put out like, records and things, and I wanna be in a band, and whatever, do it DIY."

Ian: I think, I think I've already spoken about the fact that I said, if you, the gift continues to give, but the sale ends in product, you know, um, that's a piece of advice for people to think about. I think, the advice I would give to people who are engaging in music, or political stuff, or theater, or whatever they're doing — whatever they feel they have a vision for, and they feel excited by — I always tell people to, to love it, to love what they're doing, because that way, if you — or they — don't achieve whatever — however they define, success, however they define it, if they don't achieve success, whatever that is, I don't think it's — for me, success is a daily thing, I'm very, I'm very successful right now, but, for some people, they're goal oriented, I'm not goal oriented — but if they don't achieve success, if you don't achieve success, you will, or they will, have at least spent time, doing something that you, or they loved, and most people, are miserable, as they try to achieve success, and when they don't achieve success, they're like, "I just threw my life away, because I was doing something I hated, because I thought I'd be successful." So I think people should be thoughtful about pursuing things that they really believe in, that they feel

like is — is time well spent, because that's all we got, is time.

Alright, well, thank you for your time, and—

Ian: Sure. I appreciate — let me say for the record, I think we maybe, I've mentioned this before, but if I didn't, I'm going to say it now, this interview, though I know you're recording it, and it's video, it's true, on your personal usage, and I'm not comfortable, with you posting it.

Yeah, I'm not going to post it, or anything.

Ian: I have to say it, every time now, because a couple of kids, have just posted, the actual conversation, and I'm like, "Ah, that didn't feel right," because I'm, you know, because I'm, actually, this is an amazing format, you could be in Saudi Arabia, right now, we could have the same conversation, it's insane, that this exists. But it's so easy, just to upload the video file, and it's frustrating, for me, because I don't, I'm trying to have, a one-on-one conversation, with you, on behalf of your mission to do this zine, and it's not — it was not done, so you can just stick it online, so anyway, that's just — and if you, at some point, you're like, hey, I really want to use that, I have this idea, I'd like to use a little bit, of this video, from the interview we did, if you want to call me about it, we can discuss, but as a wholesale, put it up online — no, can't do it.

Yeah.

Ian: All right, great talking to you, good luck with the zine, have fun transcribing, it's a pain in the ass, go slow, take your time—

Special to my friend Jasper for willingly going through the slow, pain in the ass process of transcribing this interview for me.

WHY STEVE ALBINI MATTERS

September 21, 2025

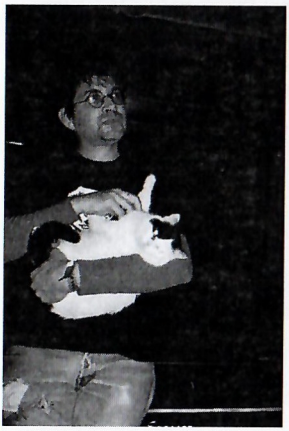
When I was 12, and just starting to listen to music, I didn't care for sound production. Even as time passed, and my ears developed, acknowledging the technicalities of my favorite records seemed excessive. It was like asking about the plumber of a cathedral. Sure, they're important. But that's missing the forest for the trees. That all changed in 8th grade. I was 14 and relistening to Nirvana's *In Utero* in my room. Nirvana had been my favorite band since I discovered them, so by that point I had heard the record hundreds of times before. But this go around was different. Something was hitting me right in the face.

It was the drum sound.

In all the records I heard by that point, from The Beatles to Black Flag, I never heard such a wonderful, powerful drum sound. The punch of *these* drums were unlike any other my ears had come to know. I was mystified. Who was behind this? Who was responsible? The man to blame was Steve Albini.

And so on that day, a love was born. Music production entered my life as a sacred form of art to cherish and take seriously. The plumber became as important as the cathedral, and I wanted to join the force. As time has progressed, I've continued my journey into sound engineering, and part of that has been exploring the discography Albini has unleashed upon the world, as both engineer and musician. Next May will mark two years since his passing. How the earth's been able to keep spinning without his presence is a mystery to me. But in celebration of how he transformed both my life and recorded music, I'd like to take some time to elaborate on the question of why Steve Albini matters.

As mentioned both previously here and by everyone under the sun, the drum sound on Albini records is incredible. But the sound doesn't exist in a vacuum, it's an extension of how he records. The core element of Steve's engineering is the strive to capture the unique tonal qualities of the artists he's recording; "*I've always strived for naturalism. I'm not saying it's like photographic realism, but I like the idea that the playback of a recording should evoke the sense memory of having seen that person play.*"[1] This is the base element of why his approach is so effective. After that aforementioned re-listening of *In Utero*, I finally understood how it carried a rawness that *Nevermind* didn't have. It struck the balance between Nirvana's appreciation for sweet melody and abrasive dissonance. It cut to the core of their sound as a band, that album *is* Nirvana. This "cutting to the core", the transparency of Steve's style, is the largest commonality between all the records he's engineered. PJ Harvey doesn't sound like Jawbreaker, so they were recorded differently, they sound like themselves. There is no style being imposed onto whoever is in the recording booth; "*I don't think that I have a single aesthetic that I want to apply to other bands. What I like to think is that I'm sensitive to what they're trying to do, and I have enough of a technical experience that I can pull off what they're trying to get at.*[2]" To me, this is the largest reason why Albini stands out. His lack of style is his style, he's a musician's engineer.



This utilitarian approach stems from the fact that Albini started recording to get his own music on tape; "*I started recording stuff*

my own as Big Black, and that's when I actually started getting involved on more of a significant level in the music scene." He's a musician's engineer because he's a musician that's an engineer. And one of the largest ways Steve's experience as a musician has differentiated him from the producers of his era was his approach to economics.
Albini is infamous for asking Nirvana to be "paid like a plumber", insisting to be paid hourly without any future royalty cuts. His refusal to take royalties on any of the albums he worked on was part of a larger philosophy which derided the traditional workings of the music industry, instead choosing to adhere to the principles of DIY; "*I don't take royalties on records that I work on partly because I think it's part of a system that exploits musicians and artists in a way that I'm just not comfortable with. But also, I don't feel like my job warrants it. There's a fundamental thing that I noticed about the music scene, whenever anyone wants to be paid a percentage of what would otherwise be your income, that person is being overpaid.*[2]" This philosophy extended to the mechanics behind his own bands; "*Within the band Shellac, we do as much as we possibly can ourselves. And I still feel like doing things yourself is valuable in it's own sake because it teaches you more about the circumstances that you work in, and it teaches you more about all the different aspects of your existence.*[3]" Big Black and Shellac booked their own tours, operated without contracts, and operated solely through independent labels and networks.

But even looking past the technicalities, the music stands on it's own two feet. The best way to describe Albini's musical output is abrasive, both sonically and lyrically. The sound of Big Black is sputtering and erratic. Each instrument blends into one sonic whole, which sounds like what a piece of industrial machinery would produce if it started listening to too much 1980's New York No Wave. In contrast, the instruments on Shellac records refuse to bleed into each other. They all carry their own unique tones. This contrast helps the instruments to define and highlight each other. The bass is deep and thundering. While the guitar is lighter, metallic, and driven to wherever the feedback takes it. This is all supported by the loud smacking drums, which carry the high energy of each song. Both bands are loud, erratic, and very much in the vein of other noise acts á la Unwound and The Jesus Lizard. Like his ethic, his sound refused to be compromised or adhere to the demands of the mainstream.

So to answer the original question "Why does Steve Albini matter?", that's really up for you to decide. But to me, Albini matters because he showed what we can do when we stick to our principles and truly love what we do. The communities we can build, the rules we can break, and the art we can make when it's decided artistic compromise is never an option. 14 year old me, who first fell in love with audio engineering because of *In Utero*, would be disappointed to discover that I'd never get the chance to make my dream record engineered by Albini. But what I do know for certain is that for as long as I'm kicking, the lessons and beliefs he's imparted onto me will be staying with me for the rest of my life, in everything that I do. I couldn't trade that for the world.

Organizationally, we were committed to a few basic principles: **Treat everyone with as much respect as he deserves** (and no more), **Avoid people who appeal to our vanity or ambition** (they always have an angle), **Operate as much as possible apart from the "music scene"** (which was never our stomping ground), and **Take no shit from anyone in the process**. - *Liner notes on "Pigpile" (1987) by Big Black*

The Engineer: Songs to Start
- *Highway '61 Revisited* by PJ Harvey
- *Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge On Seattle* by Nirvana
- *Where Is My Mind* by The Pixies
- *Mouth Breather* by The Jesus Lizard
- *Boxcar* by Jawbreaker
- *My Idea Of Fun* by The Stooges

The Musician: Songs to Start
- *Prayer to God* by Shellac
- *Squirrel Song* by Shellac
- *My Black Ass* by Shellac
- *The Model* by Big Black
- *Bad Penny* by Big Black
- *L Dopa* by Big Black

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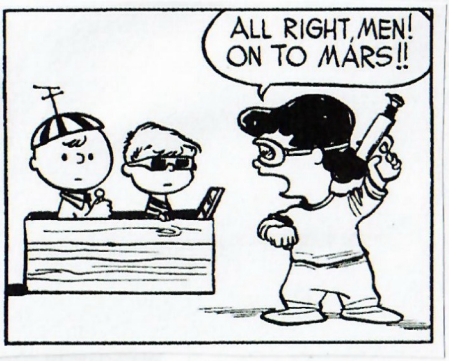

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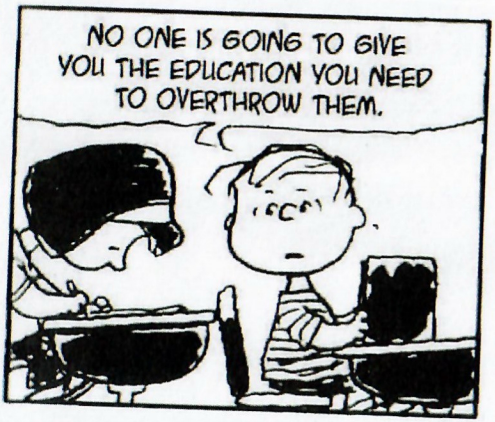
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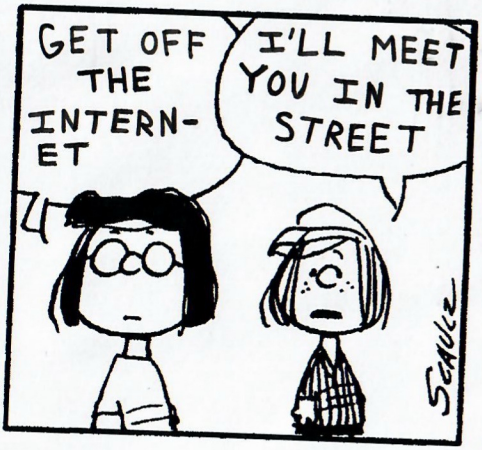
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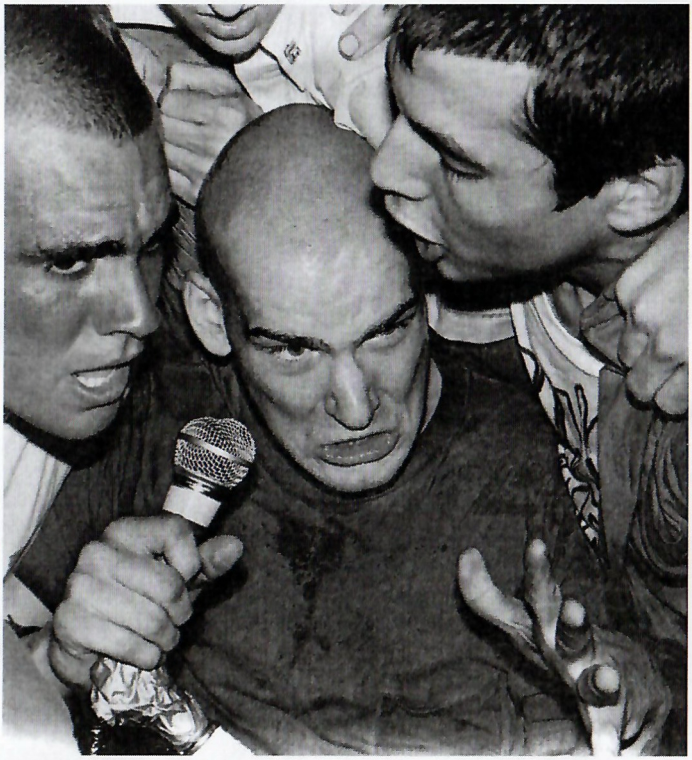

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